

PSBA STARTING OUT: A SEAT ON THE BOARD

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

ELECTION PROCESS

Q: Is there a cost associated with running for school board?

A: There are no costs required to obtain a position on the ballot. However, depending on the community and the number of individuals running, some individuals choose to spend money on campaigning for items such as signs, advertising, handouts, etc. These materials are not a requirement to run for office.

Q: What does it mean to cross-file?

A: Candidates may file petitions to appear on the primary ballot as both a Republican and a Democrat candidate, if they choose to do so. An individual may only circulate a petition on behalf of a party of which he/she is a registered member; a registered member of the other party may circulate a petition for members of that party to request your name be on the ballot.

Q: Where does an individual obtain the petitions necessary to be placed on the ballot?

A: Petitions are available at the individual's local County Elections Office. The petitions have a specific date that they can begin to be circulated and a definite end date for circulation. The last day of circulation is the date by which the petitions must be submitted to the County Elections Office. The circulator must have their signature notarized on each form he/she circulates.

Q: What advice would you offer for anyone considering running for school board?

A: First, start attending school board meetings on a regular basis. Attending school board meetings will provide you with a better understanding of what would be expected of you if you are elected. It is important to recognize that the board operates on a continuum and if elected you will, in essence, be stepping onto a moving train. It is important to know where it has been and in which direction it is going. By attending board meetings, you will know what has been happening and what decisions and planning have occurred before you take office. In addition, make an appointment to meet with the superintendent to discuss the work of the board and the challenges your school district is currently facing.

Q: Is it a disadvantage if a candidate does not have children currently in the school district?

A: It is not a disadvantage because the role of the board is governance and you do not need children in the district to govern effectively.

Q: How often are school board elections held and how long do you serve?

A: Elections for school board occur every two years. Five seats up for election and then two years later, four seats are up for election. Terms for all school directors are four years unless there is an unexpired term on the ballot. That seat would be for a two-year term.

Q: Do you recommend talking with current school directors about running for the school board?

A: Yes, current members of the board can provide vital information about the district and the ways your local board operates and provide guidance on how new school director on-boarding occurs in the district. Board members can also elaborate on the amount of time school directors spend in their roles, which often includes attending committee appointments and executive sessions and fulfilling other additional responsibilities.

NEW SCHOOL DIRECTORS

Q: What is the greatest challenge facing new school directors?

A: The amount of information they need to learn. It has been described as drinking from a fire hose. This includes learning the governance role of the board and all about the school district financials, policies, the strategic plan or comprehensive plan goals, and constraint of Federal and State regulations, etc. Recognizing your view of the school district that you have as a parent or community member is only the tip of the iceberg. The board focus is giving the children of your community the best possible education at a cost your community can afford.

Q: What are some things new school directors thought the board would decide and are surprised to learn are not board decisions?

A: Probably the most surprising is that the board is not involved in the evaluation of individual teachers and administrators. The only evaluations conducted by the board are the superintendent and assistant superintendent (if your district has one) evaluation. All other employee evaluations in the district are the responsibility of the administration.

Many are surprised to learn that the board does not run the district but ensures the district is well-run. The day-to-day operation of the school district is the superintendent's job. It is often hard for school directors to accept that when their friends have issues, the school director must explain that the board does not get involved unless the issue remains unresolved after school staff have attempted to address the issue. The board is the last authority in addressing concerns, only after the teacher or coach, principal and superintendent have all had the opportunity to solve the issue. The board governs at the "30,000-foot level," while the administration is at "ground level" managing the issues.

Q: Is there any training available for new school directors?

A: The state requires that all newly elected school directors complete five (5) hours of training within the first year of their term of office. Reseated school directors must complete three (3) hours of training within one year of their re-election. The trainings cover a variety of topics created by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. PSBA provides the required training free of charge at several in-person sessions offered on various dates around the state. The required training is also available online at myPSBA.org.

In addition, we recommend new school directors request an individual be assigned to serve as your mentor. The individual can become your resource for questions that might arise during your first year of board service.

ROLES & RESPONSIBILITIES OF SCHOOL DIRECTORS

Q: Is it the superintendent's responsibility to provide information to the school board or is it the individual director's responsibility to educate themselves?

A: The superintendent is responsible for ensuring the school directors receive the information the collective body deems necessary to make decisions. This does not mean responding to requests from individual school directors. It is the collective board that ascertains the value of the requested information to the board versus the time spent by the staff member to compile the information and the cost to the district for the staff member's time. In some situations, individual directors spend time finding additional information or studying an issue in greater depth to better understand the issue and make a more informed decision.

Q: Who runs school board meetings?

A: In most districts, the superintendent and board president by policy are responsible for creating the agenda collaboratively. The meetings in most districts are conducted by the board president. However, in some districts it is the board secretary's job to introduce the items that are to be brought before the board and the superintendent. It is based on local practice. In all cases, it is considered essential for the board to have the recommendation of the superintendent prior to voting on a proposal. All meetings follow parliamentary procedure.

Q: How are the president and vice president chosen and what are the extra responsibilities affiliated with these positions?

A: Every year the board reorganizes during the first week in December as required by the PA School Code. At this time, individuals are nominated and elected by the board to serve as president and vice president for a one-year term. In May of each year, the board elects an individual to serve as board treasurer for a one-year term. The board secretary is elected every four years by the board, also in May, for a four-year term. In many districts, it is the business manager who serves as board secretary due to the fact that the board secretary's responsibilities often involve the business affairs of the school district.

Q: What are the Principles for Governance & Leadership?

A: They are a set of guiding principles for effective school board leadership drafted by a group of school directors, school solicitors and superintendents from Pennsylvania. School directors vote to adopt the [Principles](#) either by resolution or as a policy. The adoption is the board's commitment to operate and abide by these best practices.

THE TEAM OF TEN

Q: What is the "Team of Ten" and why is it important?

A: The elected school board with the superintendent form the "Team of Ten," which is the leadership of the school district. By law, the superintendent is the tenth member of the board and has the right to speak on all matters before the board but has no vote. This dynamic "Team of Ten" has roles and responsibilities that make it an effective team to ensure that all students in your district receive a high-quality education.

Q: If you have a board with philosophic (or political) differences, is there any advice to successfully collaborate in decision making?

A: Yes, find common ground. First, it is important to recognize that the majority of decisions that come before the board will not be controversial or politically rooted. Decisions are based on the mission and vision of the district, on goals set by the strategic and comprehensive plans, and on the agreed direction of the school district.

If a board is truly divided by philosophical differences, then it is more important to focus on what can be agreed upon, rather than where disagreement lies. This enables a board to find a compromise solution that all can support.

Example: A 4% property tax increase is before the board. It is in part necessary because of the impact to the budget of the increased costs of students migrating to cyber-charter schools due to the pandemic. Some board directors have strong opposition to increased property taxes. It is important for the board to focus on the budget deficit and how to mitigate it. The superintendent reminds the board that there are only two options: reduce costs or increase revenue to balance the budget. Some want no increase and others suggest the 4% is necessary. The board sought common ground in their discussion. They all agreed that 4% was too high and all were willing to compromise on a smaller increase with cost reductions that will not impact student opportunities and success.

Following the discussion, the board asked the superintendent to bring reasonable options that would least impact teaching and learning to reduce the tax increase to 3% and an option that would bring the increase down to 2%. At the following meeting, the superintendent offers the board options for what could be eliminated or reduced to lower the tax increase. After much discussion, the board agrees on a hybrid option that delays the purchase of some much-needed maintenance equipment (including a truck) until the following school year and compromises on a 2.5% increase, which passed unanimously. In addition, the board requests that the administration draft a proposal to offer a district cyber-program option to reduce the number of students leaving the district.

Q: How do school boards hold superintendents accountable?

A: School boards are required by law to annually evaluate the superintendent. Handled correctly, this is a wonderful opportunity for two-way communication. The collective board meets to evaluate the superintendent, agreeing upon what is to be communicated regarding the performance of the superintendent over the last year. Included in the evaluation are the Objective Performance Standards mutually agreed upon by the board and the superintendent, which are posted on each school district's website. These goals are mutually set to focus on the key areas of improvement desired in the district and to ensure that everyone agrees with the direction of the district. It is essential that the board use the opportunity to not only provide feedback on how well the superintendent is meeting the expectations of the board, but also to offer accolades where appropriate on things the superintendent has done particularly well. Communication regarding the superintendent's performance should occur throughout the year in an informal manner.

Q: I hear a lot of talk about equity in schools. What does this mean and how do school directors encourage and support equity?

A: Equity is an important and often misunderstood aspect of the board's role. Equity is not equality, and it is not just about diversity. Equality is each student receiving the same resources. Equity is ensuring all students have the tools and supports they need individually to achieve their highest potential. It begins by school districts assessing their actions to overcome institutional barriers and to create local opportunities. It means ensuring students' identities will not predetermine their success in schools. PSBA has developed an [Equity Toolkit](#) that is available to guide school directors and boards through the recommended steps to begin achieving equity.

Q: People keep asking me if I am going to raise taxes. Does the school board have any influence over taxes?

A: Yes, school boards vote each year on the tax levy for the next fiscal year following approval of the district budget. The board approves the budget that determines anticipated revenue and the amount of funding necessary to operate the school district. The school board must collect enough revenue to balance the projected expenses in the budget. A balanced budget is required by Pennsylvania law.

Q: How does student social and emotional well-being fit into the role of the school board?

A: In addition to the education of students, schools work to remove barriers to student learning. This can include interventions that address issues at home, academic, mental, physical health, or social well-being. It is the school board's obligation to provide the resources for these supports.

Q: What are the responsibilities of the board/district with regard to notifying the public of school board meetings?

A: The Pennsylvania Sunshine Law requires governmental bodies in Pennsylvania to hold "open" meetings, meaning that agencies must deliberate and conduct agency business in public (sunshine) and must announce to the public in advance when and where meetings will be held in order for the public to attend and have the opportunity to comment before the board takes official action.

The PA Sunshine Law does permit school boards to discuss a limited number of items in a closed meeting or "out of sunshine." The school board may hold executive sessions for these reasons:

1. Personnel matters.
2. Information, strategy and negotiation related to negotiation of a collective bargaining agreement.
3. Consideration of the lease or purchase of property.
4. Consulting with an attorney about active or pending litigation.
5. Discussing agency business which if conducted in public, would violate a lawful privilege or lead to disclosure of information or confidentiality protected by law.
6. Discussion of certain public safety issues if disclosure of the information would be reasonably likely to jeopardize or threaten public safety or preparedness or public protection.
7. Boards also can participate in training sessions and informational briefings that need not be open to the public. These are called "conferences" rather than executive sessions.